

Last Christmas by Verbo

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Summary:

It's right before Christmas and a creature is stirring - it's a woman driving the '75 Chevy Blazer belonging to the Police Chief of Hawkins, Indiana, getting horribly lost in the worst blizzard the county has ever seen. She's cursing her bad luck now, but she ain't seen nothing yet.

Last Christmas

Author's Note:

I really struggled with whether to make the female main character the reader or an O.C., and I landed somewhere in the middle. "Edith" is really just you, if you want her to be.

SPOILERS FOR SEASON 2

"I tell ya, Chuck, this has got to be the worst snow I ever seen. 'Least since '78."

"Right you are, Norm, the Hoosier State is having a tough time with this one. Anybody who's not listening to us at home right now is just plain stup-"

Edith switches the radio off with a sigh. She already feels like an idiot, and she doesn't need the local radio chuckleheads to remind her of that.

Nope, Edith isn't one of those smart, warm people curled up in front of their fireplace with a cup of coffee, watching this bastard of a blizzard from the safety of their living room. Oh, to be warm. No, she's currently driving definitely too fast down a totally unmarked Indiana backroad in the Hawkins P.D. patrol truck that she convinced her boyfriend to let her borrow.

"It's only supposed to be a little flurry," she'd whined.

"Please, Hop, I'll be really careful with the truck," she'd begged.

"I really need to get something special for Jane for Christmas," she'd pleaded.

'Little flurry' her ass. The weather girl totally made that shit up. Edith would never let her dumb face be broadcast into her home again. If she ever gets back home.

Right now, she's cursing the weather, which is already surpassing even the most severe estimates. She's cursing tiny Hawkins, Indiana for not having a store worth shopping in, which forced her to drive a couple of hours away to the nearest retail center that wasn't a drugstore. Most of all, she's cursing herself.

Edith is cursing herself for giving in to the consumerist spirit of the season when she knows perfectly well that her boyfriend would be elated to just receive her naked as a gift. She's cursing herself for trying to get home from memory rather than a map. Not that that would have helped, anyway; the state map in the glove box is all but illegible due to a giant coffee stain. Really, Jim?

Next to her on the tan leather seat are the shopping bags that she so lovingly filled with Christmas gifts just an hour ago. Edith sighs when she sees them in the corner of her eye, wondering if they were worth all this anxiety. She should have just stayed at the mall. It was warm and there was food. She and her stomach groan in unison.

This road probably isn't even maintained by the state. Everything is just a blinding blanket of white, with a forest full of spindly black trees on either side. Edith can barely see the road, much less twenty feet in front of her, through the driving snow and ice. It has to be at least half a foot deep. Fuck.

At least Hop's truck has 4-wheel drive and working heat.

The woman looks from one side of the road to the other, as she has done countless times since getting officially lost, searching desperately for other drivers or a street that might have houses with a phone or *anything*. But of course not.

Maybe she died and is now experiencing hell. Getting hopelessly lost in the backwoods of Roane County is close enough.

Oh god, what the hell is *that*?

Something ambles out of the woods and onto the road. Something black and four-legged, but she can't see it very well. It lifts its head drowsily, unaware of the two tons of steel bearing down on it. Instinctively, Edith mashes her foot down on the brake and

immediately regrets that decision.

The wheels of the police truck begin to fishtail. A leaden ball of dread drops into her stomach as the heavy vehicle suddenly feels weightless under her. Before she can process what's happening, the shiny shopping bags and everything in them are flying around the cab in a flurry of color. She doesn't even have time to scream. The last thing Edith sees is her hands flying up to protect her face before everything goes black.

Hopper sits in his office, staring out the window at the snowfall and considering picking up ice cream on his way home from work. Then he remembers that Edith's picking him up and that she might chastise him for eating ice cream and beer for dinner. Again.

Jane would, too, he realizes with a smile. The day goes by a little quicker when he thinks of his girls, waiting for him at home with hugs and smiles and requests for a game of Crazy Eights. Jane is getting so good at cards that he thinks Edie might be coaching her when he's not there.

A knock at the door pulls him out of his reverie. He grunts in response and Powell sticks his head in, assuring the chief that he and Callahan have the missing lawn gnomes case covered if Hopper wants to head home.

"Didn't realize it was that time already," Hopper yawns with a stretch. "Time flies when you're solving the mysteries of the century."

Jim grabs his hat and coat and looks through the blinds for the truck, thinking he'll see her parked there with the passenger seat full of loot from her trip to the mall.

When she isn't there, he checks his watch again. Yep, 5:30. Edith said she'd be waiting in the parking lot keeping the truck warm right at 5:30. That was one of the stipulations for letting her borrow the thing in the first place.

He slides back into his chair with a sigh, vowing to give her shit

when she gets there. *May as well knock out some of the ol' 'In' box*, he figures, but he knows he's just going to rifle through the pile aimlessly.

Forty-five minutes of dicking around later, Hopper is starting to feel a little anxious. Which he hates. He checks his watch, then the window for the hundredth time, and runs a hand through his dirty-blond hair. He pages Flo, who informs him that no, she hasn't heard from his girlfriend, and that she's going home before the storm strands her at the station and good night, Chief Hopper.

Maybe the lines at the mall are just really bad. He'd told her she was nuts to go shopping at this time of year, but she was determined to find something really special for Jane. Couldn't she at least find a phone?

Thankfully, Powell is still at his desk in the main room, dutifully filling out missing property reports for each and every member of the Gnome family, when Hopper emerges from his darkened office.

"You still here, Chief? Thought you were long gone," the officer says, signing the last of the sheaf of papers. Jim leans on the desk and hangs his head.

"Yeah. Hey, so listen, Cal, you know I hate to ask you for a favor," he starts.

"News to me," the other man scoffs without looking up from his work.

"Funny. Look, it doesn't look like my ride is gonna come through. You willing to take me out to Powder Springs?"

Calvin complains but gives in eventually, with the stipulation that the Chief owes him a drink next time they make the rounds in town.

A hastily-scrawled note is left on the station door that could be for anyone but isn't: "Gone home. Be safe. -H"

It's spring in Hawkins and Edith is in her boyfriend's bedroom,

unpacking. Well, actually, now it's *her* bedroom too. That fact makes her hopelessly romantic heart leap a little. It's about time he asked her to move in with him and Jane; Edith was starting to worry that maybe she was more invested in this relationship than he was.

The afternoon sun is filtering into the room through the dusty blinds as she goes through the boxes of stuff she lugged from her apartment. She's scooting Hopper's shirts to one side of the drawer to make room for hers when she hears him call for her from the living room.

"What, getting impatient for dinner already?" Edith jokes as she walks in, but stops when she sees Hopper and Jane, standing side by side with matching sullen expressions at the makeshift kitchen table. Something's wrong.

"Hop?"

He doesn't answer, just motions for Edith to sit in her usual chair at the table. She slowly makes her way over with mounting concern, trying to catch his stony gaze, and sits. Hopper turns and pulls a Schlitz from the fridge, sitting it down on the table in front of her.

"What, am I gonna need a beer for this?"

Jim doesn't even smirk. That's definitely not like him. Edith's concern only grows.

"Jane is...", Hopper begins hesitantly, looking for the right word. "Special."

Jane looks from the beer can up to Jim, brown eyes full of apprehension. His lips are pressed into a thin line.

"No matter what, you have to know," Hopper mutters, sounding like he's trying to convince himself more than anything. "Because..."

"Because friends don't lie," Jane finishes.

He exhales and nods at her, then they both turn to face the woman at the table. Edith's instinct is to laugh in an effort to ease the sudden, inexplicable tension.

“Guys, come on, I already know Jane is spe-”

And then the Schlitz is hovering over the table.

Jane stretches out her tiny fingers and the can bends to her will, rotating in place and reflecting the dingy overhead light. She tilts her head, face deadly serious, and the can slides through midair to her waiting hand.

What...what the fuck?

Jane swiftly wipes her nose on her sleeve, takes a deep breath, then joins Hopper in looking earnestly at the floor. Stock-still, staring blankly at the can of beer in Jane's hand, then at the girl herself, Edith tries to get some kind of sentence out to break the silence.

“Jane, honey,” is all she manages.

“Friends don't lie,” Jane repeats, still avoiding Edith's eyes. Hopper squeezes her shoulder.

Then Edith slams her hand down on the card table with a bang that makes Hopper and Jane jump and the salt shaker topple over. Her squeal of incredulous laughter echoes through the tiny kitchen as she rises from her seat.

“That is amazing! Holy shit!” Edith cries, and gathers the baffled girl into a crushing hug, ruffling her Shirley Temple curls.

That display of power made Hopper's strange house, err, cabin rules suddenly make a lot of sense. No inviting company, no deliveries, no taking Jane anywhere. Edith didn't quite understand, and she knows she might never do so, but she did know that she was beyond committed to keeping her precious, strange family safe.

Edith is awake and upside-down.

Her slowly-returning vision goes from black to grey to painfully white. There is white all around, and she's never been so cold in all her life. She's reminded of fierce Indiana winters from her childhood

and the way her mother would make her wear at least five layers. Maybe she should have heeded that advice.

Reaching a shaky hand up to the ceiling, which is now the floor, results in fingertips covered in tiny shards of glass and an alarming amount of blood. Brightly-colored tissue paper and hard-won Christmas gifts are strewn all over, also covered in bits of windshield and blood and snow. The Nintendo she bought for Jane, the one she searched every picked-over store for, lays smashed and useless by the back window.

And oh, ow, it hurts to be alive, but a pat-down of her hanging body reassures Edith that all her parts are intact.

Howling winds are kicking in more of that blasted white stuff and it likely won't be long before the cab is completely buried. Her fingers feel frozen stiff even through her thick gloves. It's painful, but she manages to reach the transmitter of the truck's CB radio and bring it to her numb lips.

"Breaker, breaker, anyone out there? S.O.S. Need help badly. My 20 is some piece of shit backroad off of the 25 in...well, I *think* I'm still in Roane County. I'm in an overturned county mounty truck, but not an officer, repeat, not an officer. Over."

Not a peep. The radio is as dead as the engine probably is. Edith tries again anyway, suppressing the panic rising in her throat.

"4-10? 4-10? Please, if anyone's listening, need help, over."

Still nothing.

Edith could swear there's something out there, something moving right by the driver's side window. She stays dead still, breath coming in shallow bursts. She tries to recall exactly what that thing was that she put herself into this terrible situation to avoid hitting.

It hurts to think. It was small, black, four-legged. Dog? Bear cub? She decides that, whatever it is, it's best to let it get bored and wander off before trying to dig her way out of the trashed truck.

And then what? Now that she's fully awake, Edith's is racing with the

ominous realities of the situation. Obviously no-one's been down this road in hours - it was 5-something when she wrecked, and her watch says it's 7:09 now. There weren't any sideroads off this god-forsaken stretch of backwoods boulevard, so probably no houses with phones. Even if someone has CB in these woods, they're not hearing her.

And Jim, oh god, she was supposed to pick him up from the station right at 5:30 and she knows how he worries. Edith is almost glad he isn't here now to scold her poor judgment.

She strains her ears against the shrieking wind, trying to hear what's going on outside the truck. When she doesn't hear any movement, Edith wonders if the dog-bear-thing has finally given up on sniffing her out. Phew.

Edith is carefully lowering herself to the caved-in ceiling when the truck rocks.

It's now, riding in silence in Officer Powell's passenger seat, that Jim regrets not investing in a second car.

Like most people in rural Indiana, Cal's truck has (less-than-legal) CB. When they pull up to the edge of the forest, Hopper takes the transmitter.

Knowing Jane is listening, he clicks in the message: ...---.-...---
...---.-.---., **SORRY FOR LATE**

He pauses, giving her time to decipher, then finishes with: .-...-----,
ALONE

Cal watches the chief go, wondering what the hell he's gotten himself into.

Hopper spends the long trek through the snowy woods trying to make himself believe that Edith just forgot to pick him up and is sitting by the wood furnace right now, sharing hot chocolate with Jane.

No such luck. The clearing around the cabin is empty of tan Chevy

Blazers.

Now Hopper is feeling that all-too-familiar tingling sensation starting up in the back of his throat. It was there when he realized he was going to lose Sara. It was there when he thought he would lose the Byers boy. It feels like he might puke.

Maybe she just went back out. Maybe she remembered she was supposed to come get him. Hell, maybe they were out of milk.

She would have called, he knows deep down, and repeats it to himself all the way up to the porch. He passes the one string of Christmas lights that his girlfriend persuaded him to let her and Jane hang on the railing and puts in the secret knock at the front door. *She would have called, she would have called, she would have called.*

The door unlocks itself and Hopper tries not to startle Jane by bursting in. He doesn't bother to kick the snow off his boots. The girl's wide brown eyes turn to him from her spot in front of the blaring T.V. The cheery glow of the Christmas tree stands in eerie contrast to the dread creeping up Hopper's spine.

"Late," is all she says, softly, before returning to *The Young and The Restless*.

"I know," Hop tries to sound nonchalant while scanning the kitchen for any signs that Edith has been there. "I thought I told you that watching that garbage would rot your brain."

The girl shrugs, then asks, "Where is Edie?"

Hopper's stomach turns and his throat tightens further.

Officer Powell is surprised to see the Chief come jogging toward him through the curtain of falling snow, expression uncharacteristically rattled. He rolls the window down as fast as he can as Hopper stumbles to a halt beside the car, panting heavily. When their eyes meet, something terrible passes between them that makes the younger man shudder.

"Cal, I need you to call this one in."

Maybe a sane person would stay in the truck until help arrived, but then again, Edith thinks, maybe a sane person doesn't exist in these conditions.

The truck is still for now, leaving the trapped woman with the impression that it wasn't the wind that moved it. Edith turns her throbbing head this way and that, begging no one in particular for some kind of amnesty...something, *anything*.

Oh, thank god, a gun. A pistol that Hopper must have kept under the seat is now to her right, by the overhead light. She doesn't know how to check if there are any bullets, but that doesn't matter right now. If that dog thing or any other animal is still hanging around, at least she has something to protect herself with.

Edith sees the Chief's aviators up where the rear-view mirror used to be, crushed up from the wreck. She doesn't know why, but she grabs those, too, and tucks them into her coat pocket. She has a feeling that having a piece of Hopper will help keep her safe somehow, as though being in the man's possession imbued them with some kind of protective power. It's the motivation she needs to get out of here and start making tracks back toward civilization.

Time to get out of this deathtrap.

Edith grabs the flashlight and road flare that Hop keeps in the glovebox and wiggles her way over to the mangled driver's-side window. Everywhere is sore and there's blood seeping into her eyes, but adrenaline pushes her to dig away at the encroaching snow with her stiff hands, slowly making a dent in the drift that has built up around the truck since she's been stuck here.

She finds the world above the snow to be full dark, no stars. Zero visibility, not even a hint of the moon. But that's okay, she has the flashlight and the flare, and she hadn't driven that far off the beaten path...right? And whatever that animal was, it seems to have been scared off into the woods, because it's nowhere to be seen.

A once-over of the truck confirms Edith's suspicions: it is well and truly fucked. No time to worry what the Chief would have to say about this. Gotta get moving.

She pulls her thick coat in tighter around her, wraps her blood-spotted scarf around her head, and sets off the way she came. After a few yards, she realizes that she was dead wrong. Not only did the dog thing not go away, it brought friends.

Five of them have gathered a little ways ahead of Edith on the road and are all turning their heads toward the intruder. Wait, their heads, what the fuck is wrong with their *heads*? Why are they so...deformed? And why are they *dripping*? Rabies?

She takes a step back instinctively and that's when the noise starts. This wet, grinding noise that's making her ears ring. The dog things start ambling unnaturally in her direction and fuck no she's not hanging around to figure out what that awful sound is.

They break out into a sprint at the same time Edith does; she can hear their paws making short work of the deep snow while she struggles to stay upright. She runs until her lungs and legs are burning, clambering up on top of the overturned Blazer and whipping around to see the animals not far behind. Trembling with cold and fear, she raises the Chief's pistol and they almost seem hesitant to move closer, almost like they *know*, somehow.

Edith fires a shot in their direction and misses by a mile. They aren't deterred, nor are they going to have much trouble getting up here and tearing her limb from limb. Thinking quickly, she takes a leap of faith from the truck to the steep hill leading up to the forest. The dog things jump and snap at her ankles as she clammers up the incline.

When she reaches the top, she immediately regrets looking back. The beasts' swollen heads have been replaced with cavernous holes packed with jagged, dripping teeth. She stumbles back and takes off into the pitch-black forest.

Edith's not far into the woods when she hears them cresting the hill behind her, making all sorts of ghoulish noises that sound vaguely dog-like but horribly distorted. She feels like she's treading water. A

grim realization comes over her; there's nothing she can do to stop them from closing the distance.

"We've done all we can for now, Chief. You go on home and get some rest. We'll call you as soon as we get something."

Hopper knew that Officer Powell meant well when he said it, but he couldn't see how going home was supposed to help. There wasn't anyone Hop would have trusted more with the search, but he felt so useless sitting on his ass while the rest of the force was dedicated to working through the night.

Instead of taking Cal's advice, the chief is collapsed on the couch at home, forehead on his knees. It's past 7:00 now and the sun is long gone. God forbid, but if Edie's stuck somewhere, she's got to be cold and hungry and Hopper has never felt so helpless.

If only he'd paid closer attention to the weather forecasts, if only he'd gone with her, if only he'd followed his own goddamned rule about not taking risks. If only he'd believed Joyce right away, if only he'd gone with Bob, if only he'd stayed in New York, if only he'd never been born.

He remembers a time before Edith, before Jane, when it was just him and his trailer and his apathy. He remembers how fucking lucky he felt when this incredibly strong little girl agreed to let him take care of her - and who's taking care of who now? - and when that incredibly loving woman decided to look past his baggage and beer gut.

He remembers how she waited so patiently for him to stop looking so regretfully at the doors that had been closed to him, and to start seeing the one she had opened.

And, god, isn't he going to feel like a massive idiot if she was just stuck in traffic.

He downs two more of the trusty blue pills with a swig of coffee, bringing him to a total of too goddamn many, and goes back to

holding his sides like that will keep him together.

Hopper jumps out of his skin when a small hand alights on his shoulder. Jane, of course. He tries to hide behind a smile, but the girl is too smart to be fooled by that. His eyes are probably bloodshot to hell anyway.

In her other hand, Jane holds a Polaroid that Hopper recognizes right away - a photo he took of his girlfriend and his now-daughter grinning from ear to ear, putting silver tinsel on last year's Christmas tree. There's more tinsel on the girls than on the tree since they kept tossing it at each other. Sade was playing on the Pioneer, even though Hopper would have preferred CCR, because that's what made her happy.

Hopper keeps the picture in his nightstand drawer because the smiles are so genuine and it reminds him of how quickly the girls clicked and of how absolutely full-to-bursting his heart was. He keeps it to remind himself that he will never spend another Christmas alone in front of the T.V., drinking himself into a stupor.

How Jane knew the photo was there, he has no clue.

"I want to help," the kid says, holding the photo closer to Jim's face. He opens his mouth to protest, but sees her peering at him resolutely from under her messy brown hair and knows right away that there's no convincing her otherwise.

As he looks down at her moments later, blindfolded and sitting cross-legged in front of the static T.V. set, Hopper grimaces. He hates to do this to Jane, hates seeing the energy she has to expend and the telltale stream of blood that creeps him the hell out. But when he thinks of the woman he loves being scared and alone, he knows that he would have asked Jane to do it eventually. He isn't sure he likes that about himself.

The small girl clutches the photo to her chest, nearly crushing it, and it's only then that Hopper realizes that Jane's scared, too. Her face isn't unlike the color of the falling snow outside the window and her forehead is a roadmap of premature wrinkles of concentration. Hopper can't guess what she's seeing right now, and he doesn't want

to. He holds onto the door frame for stability and covers his mouth with his other hand, every second an eon.

“She’s still here, but she’s cold,” Jane says tersely. She pulls up the blindfold and Hopper doesn’t like what he sees in her expression. “She’s hurt and she’s calling for us.”

Hopper just stares, mouth open. Jane stands.

“She needs us. Now.”

As if he needed any more motivation.

The moment Edith expects the back of her coat to get caught up in one of those barbed maws, she feels the earth beneath her feet give way to nothingness.

A short tumble finds her at the bottom of a hole at least six feet deep. The dog-things skid to a halt above her, all except for one that didn’t stop short enough and topples down nearly on top of her. Edith lets out a shriek and darts to the other side of the small sinkhole while the creature rights itself, shaking its bloated head.

As the thing draws nearer, Edith thinks of Jim and Jane, opening their Christmas presents and smiling and laughing with her. She decides that this won’t be the end of her, not like this, and raises Hopper’s pistol at the snarling beast. When it lunges with an unholy bellow, she fires. This time, she doesn’t miss.

The creature is blasted back to the other wall of the hole, missing a good portion of its uppermost storey. Edith’s grey coat is splattered with whatever was inside it.

The rest of the pack circles above her head, growling in frustration, kicking in showers of snow and dirt and leaves. Edith holds her breath, letting out a cry of relief only when it seems certain that the other animals won’t follow. She slumps to the muddy floor.

When she looks up an hour later, she can still see them, stalking around the sinkhole. At least, she thinks she can. The shadows

become them, snarling and bellowing and hungry. Blackness dances at the corners of her eyes, threatening to overtake her.

Their sounds echo in her ears and, if she ever gets out of this, will probably do so forever. On the plus side, she's not hungry anymore. Can't feel much of anything in her midsection, really.

Edith gives it as much time as she can. She's feeling woozy and knows she has to figure a way out of this hole soon, before the last of her waning strength is completely gone. No one would ever find her down here.

Time is passing in confusing starts and stops, but she thinks the dogs are gone now.

She stands and tests the sturdiness of an exposed tree root sticking out of the wall near the top. It feels like it will hold her long enough so that she can pull herself out. She's wrong about that. Just as she hoists herself to the rim of the sinkhole, the root gives way and she lands hard on her ass. There's no energy left for her to do anything but stay there.

Edith thinks only of kissing and hugging her Jim and her Jane before drifting away peacefully at the bottom of the hole.

It's Autumn now, around Halloween, and Edith is pissed.

Hop has been spending a lot of time away, but he won't tell her why. That means it's Mrs. Byers. Again.

That woman just cannot seem to get herself together and seems to call Hopper the moment her younger son so much as sneezes. Not the police, just Hopper, and it makes things tense sometimes.

Tonight, he's at her beck and call again, and Edith might just explode. She watches bitterly from the kitchen as her boyfriend buckles his belt and walks to the kitchen table for his hat.

"Can't you at least tell me *why* you're blowing off your family for crazy Mrs. Byers?" Edith snaps at him.

"You know I can't talk about ongoing investigations," Hopper deflects, sliding his hat on without meeting the angry woman's eyes. That shortens her lit fuse a good bit. She stops what she's doing and whirls on him, feeling her indignant, jealous anger bubbling up to a breaking point.

"Oh my *GOD*, Jim, what is left to investigate? Huh??"

Hopper closes his eyes and presses his lips together in an expression that says *here we go again*.

"Babe—"

"The news said the kid was missing in the woods, and then he came home!"

Jane's door clicks shut softly, walling her away from the bickering. Guilt builds up in Edith's chest and adds fuel to her fire.

"Hey." Hopper's voice takes on a more serious tone now, and he looks at her sternly from under the brim of his hat. Screw him. Edith's voice gets louder and she feels like she can't control the pent-up hurt spilling out now.

"What, now you need to investigate how much of a high-school crush little Joyce Byers still has on James Hopper? Fucking blow me." She yanks off the oven mitt and slams it down on the linoleum counter with a slap. "You know what? You guys can just run off and be old together—"

Hopper's hands are gripping Edith's upper arms, hard. The much taller man has his face level with hers, and his eyes are steel.

"Mother of god, would you let me talk? For five seconds? Huh?"

She's never heard him get this loud before, not ever. Complete silence follows his outburst, save for the creaky ceiling fan in the living room. The air feels heavy all of a sudden.

"So talk," she mumbles, crossing her arms in an attempt to hide the goosebumps.

Hopper moves to his spot at the kitchen table, picks up his jacket, and sighs sharply through his nose.

“All you need to know is that that kid might not be out of the woods yet. Metaphorically,” he starts, much quieter this time. “I’m telling you, for your own good, that’s all you need to know.”

Edith throws her hands up in reluctant defeat and rolls her eyes. Hop’s frown deepens.

“Fine, Jim. Fucking Fine.”

“I’m trying. To. Protect you,” Hopper says through gritted teeth while she glares at him. He jerks the door open. “Stop making it so goddamn hard.”

Slam. Gone.

Edith throws the dinner she was making in the trash with a huff and pulls the half-finished tub of ice cream out of the freezer. A beer and a Coke join the ice cream in her arms as Jane pokes her head out of her room cautiously. The two of them can have a perfectly good evening without that asshole. Edith has some Crazy Eights strategies to teach her that will make her practically unbeatable, anyway.

And...and what happened after that? Did she have life-altering make-up sex with Hop? Did she remember to show Jane that card trick? Nothing comes to mind except bitter, caustic cold.

The memory is a biting one, and Edith can distantly feel hot tears instantly turn ice-cold on her burning cheeks.

“Jim,” she chokes out in the darkness, and the sobs can’t be stopped. “Jim, I’m...I’m sorry.”

She thinks she can hear something shuffling through the snow a few yards away. A twig snaps. The panic makes her start to wail for him, her frostbitten mind hazy and irrational.

“Hopper!”

“Hop! *Please!*”

“*Hopper!*”

“m sorry! Jane! An’one! Pl...lease!”

For what feels like hours, Edith cries out for her family, coat collar soaked with tears and saliva, surrounding trees sending her harsh, failing voice back at her a hundred times over. Eventually her shouts become the wordless cries of a desperate animal.

Moonlight breaks through the storm for a moment and gleams menacingly off the pistol. Edith knows that even if she wanted to let go of it, she couldn’t. Her stone-cold fingers are curled around the grip for good. Heart rate is so slow and weak that she might be imagining it, a comforting lie to ease her into the big sleep.

An hour ago, Cal called and exclaimed breathlessly, “Chief, Haddonfield P.D. just got a call from a concerned citizen, says a woman made an S.O.S. somewhere on Route 218, off the 25, but before you go running off-”

Hopper hung up the phone, gathered Jane, and sprinted for the other truck the department left for him at the edge of his woods.

Now he flicks the ashes of his ninth cigarette and counting out the window. The roads are bad; not just covered in snow, but dotted with abandoned cars. The long drive is white-knuckled and full of silent pleading. Jane sits at the edge of her seat beside him, pale-faced and eagle-eyed.

When the Hawkins P.D. truck finally comes into view despite the shroud of snow, Jim can barely contain himself. He never buckled his seatbelt, just bolts from the borrowed police truck as soon as the tires stop turning.

The small footprints she must have made are completely covered by now, erasing any evidence that she was even here. Hopper looks up the hill to the woods, where she probably tried to seek refuge from the storm.

Jim scrambles up the embankment, stumbling and catching himself hard halfway up. He probably did something to his wrist, but the adrenaline pounding in his ears whisks the pain away. He turns and lifts Jane up easily and they take off into the thick trees.

A few minutes into the woods, and small tracks begin to appear - recent, and made by no animal Jim's ever seen.

Something - four somethings, to be precise - catch Hopper's flashlight a couple hundred feet away. When he recognizes the things that he spent all last November wiping out, the chief hears his heart pounding in his ears. For fuck's sake, what are *they* doing here?

"You again," he says under his breath, and a well-practiced hand is already aiming his revolver dead center on one of the things' misshapen heads. The dread is at maximum now. If Edith's in these woods, she doesn't stand a chance. Hopper stifles that nagging inner voice as he was trained to do and goes to squeeze the trigger.

Then, lightning-fast, the thing's head is bent at an unnatural angle with a sickening crack that echoes through the trees. It collapses into the snow and the other creatures waste no time baring their endless teeth and darting forward to neutralize the threat.

Six .38 bullets and a healthy dose of psychic interference make sure they don't even come close.

"Hopper," Jane breathes.

When he looks up, she's pointing off to the right at something glinting in the distance. Jim passes his flashlight over the area, and the light reflects off something. It's enough. He starts out at a sprint toward the flash, calling hoarsely for Edie.

Hopper sees what caught the light a minute later - his aviators are sticking out of the snow at the edge of a sinkhole. A crumpled shape in a filthy grey coat rests at the bottom.

"It's her," he gasps back at Jane, who's fallen behind. "It's her, it's her."

Hopper jumps down without hesitation and falls to his knees beside

her, unable to get her shuddering body into his arms fast enough. She's covered from the waist down in new snow. He whips off his coat and swaddles her, holding her icy body to his chest as he stands. He knows this is only going to make his wrist worse, but that's a problem for tomorrow's Hopper.

Jane catches up as Hopper is lifting Edith out of her earthen prison, eyes wide and searching the woman's face. The pallid lips start to tremble and she knows he's here, even though she doesn't open her eyes.

"Hopp...er...Hop...I called out on the radio...I called out like you taught me..."

Her voice is so small, he can barely understand her. Hopper follows the two sets of footprints he and Jane made past the contorted carcasses of the Demodogs.

"I know, baby. Somebody heard you. You did great."

"M sorry...Hop, Jane, I'm sorry...so stupid of me..."

"We're *not* stupid," Jane corrects firmly, trying to keep up with Hopper's long strides. The battered woman in Hopper's arms keeps mumbling all the same.

"Jim, the presents, I got blood all over the presents..." She reaches up a quivering hand to touch his cheek.

"Forget the fucking presents. I love you. I love you so much."

As the Hopper family exits the forest at last, blinding blue and red lights let them know that help has caught up to them. Several uniformed medical personnel gather at the bottom of the steep embankment and Hopper lowers Edith to them gently before climbing down himself. He helps Jane down, then sets off behind the bustling paramedics.

Jim exchanges a familiar nod with this county's sheriff, who knows to pack up his boys and head back to the station, no questions asked. Hop owes Calvin more than just a drink.

In the back of the ambulance, Edith tenderly wipes the blood away from Jane's nose and smiles weakly when the child lays her head on her chest. Jim gathers them both in his arms and kisses the tops of their snow-dappled heads.

Somewhere deep in the woods, there are creatures sniffing around the bodies of their fallen, awaiting direction from something much bigger and more powerful.

In the back of the departing ambulance, though, the Hopper family is freezing and scared, but each is comforted by the thought of a little cabin with a single string of Christmas lights.

Author's Note:

Thanks for reading this long-ass one-shot!

Please tell me what you thought!